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Grandmother's story of  
Bunker Hill battle

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Grandmother's Story  
of  
Bunker Hill Battle  
*as She Saw it from the Belfry*  
by

Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1809 - 1894  
With Illustrations by  
Howard Pyle



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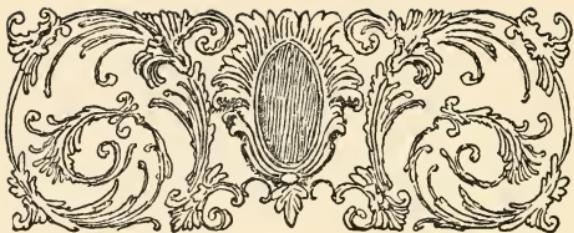
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P.

GRANDMOTHER'S STORY  
of  
BUNKER HILL  
BATTLE

'T is like stirring living embers when,  
at eighty, one remembers  
All the aching and the quakings of  
"the times that tried men's  
souls;"  
When I talk of *Whig* and *Tory*,  
when I tell the *Rebel* story,  
To you the words are ashes, but to  
me they're burning coals.

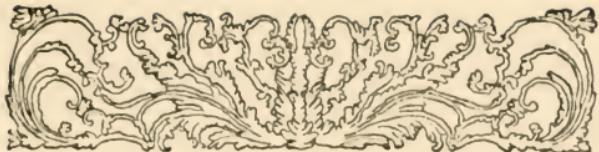


I had heard the muskets' rattle of the  
April running battle;  
Lord Percy's hunted soldiers, I can  
see their red coats still;  
But a deadly chill comes o'er me, as  
the day looms up before me,  
When a thousand men lay bleeding  
on the slopes of Bunker's Hill.





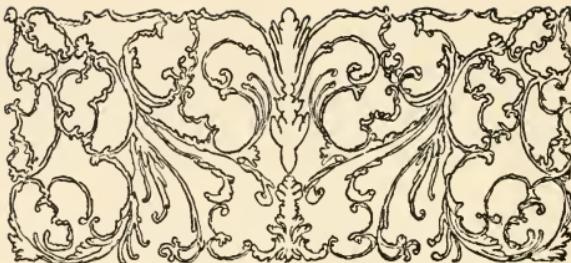




'T was a peaceful summer's morning,  
when the first thing gave us warn-  
ing  
Was the booming of the cannon from  
the river and the shore :  
" Child," says grandma, " what 's the  
matter, what is all this noise and  
clatter ?  
Have those scalping Indian devils  
come to murder us once more ? "

11





Poor old soul ! my sides were shaking  
in the midst of all my quaking,  
To hear her talk of Indians when the  
guns began to roar :  
She had seen the burning village, and  
the slaughter and the pillage,  
When the Mohawks killed her father  
with their bullets through his  
door.



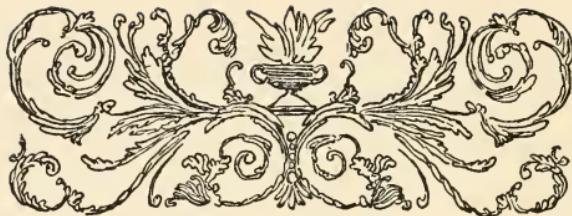






Then I said, "Now, dear old granny,  
don't you fret and worry any,  
For I 'll soon come back and tell you  
whether this is work or play;  
There can't be mischief in it, so I  
won't be gone a minute"—  
For a minute then I started. I was  
gone the livelong day.





No time for bodice-lacing or for looking-glass grimacing;  
Down my hair went as I hurried,  
tumbling half-way to my heels;  
God forbid your ever knowing, when  
there 's blood around her flowing,  
How the lonely, helpless daughter of  
a quiet household feels !



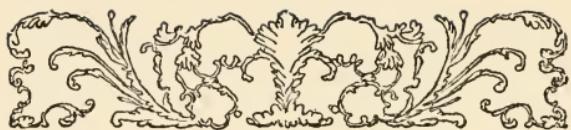






In the street I heard a thumping; and  
I knew it was the stumping  
Of the Corporal, our old neighbor, on  
that wooden leg he wore,  
With a knot of women round him,—  
it was lucky I had found him,  
So I followed with the others, and the  
Corporal marched before.



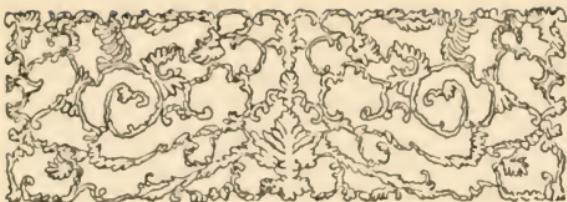


They were making for the steeple,—  
    the old soldier and his people;  
The pigeons circled round us as we  
    climbed the creaking stair,  
Just across the narrow river—oh,  
    so close it made me shiver!—  
Stood a fortress on the hill-top that  
    but yesterday was bare.



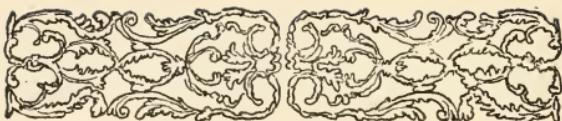






Not slow our eyes to find it ; well we  
knew who stood behind it,  
Though the earthwork hid them from  
us, and the stubborn walls were  
dumb :  
Here were sister, wife, and mother,  
looking wild upon each other,  
And their lips were white with terror  
as they said, THE HOUR HAS  
COME !





The morning slowly wasted, not a  
morsel had we tasted,  
And our heads were almost splitting  
with the cannons' deafening thrill,  
When a figure tall and stately round  
the rampart strode sedately ;  
It was PRESCOTT, one since told me ;  
he commanded on the hill.



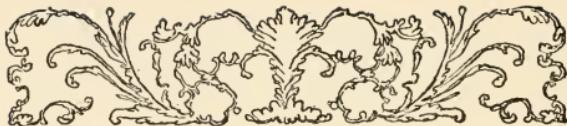






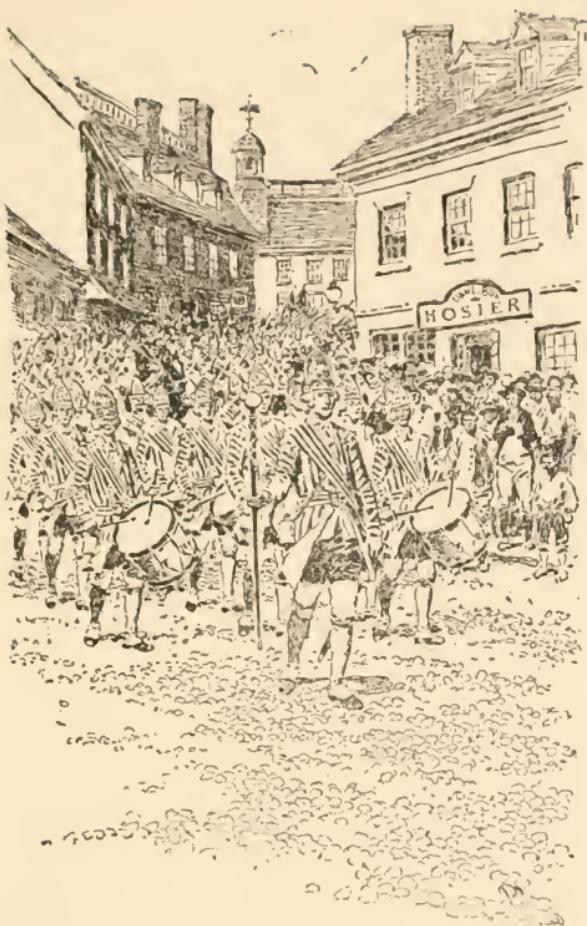
Every woman's heart grew bigger  
    when we saw his manly figure,  
With the banyan buckled round it,  
    standing up so straight and tall;  
Like a gentleman of leisure who is  
    strolling out for pleasure,  
Through the storm of shells and can-  
    non-shot he walked around the  
wall.





At eleven the streets were swarming,  
for the red-coats' ranks were  
forming;  
At noon in marching order they were  
moving to the piers;  
How the bayonets gleamed and glis-  
tened, as we looked far down, and  
listened  
To the trampling and the drum-beat  
of the belted grenadiers !







11



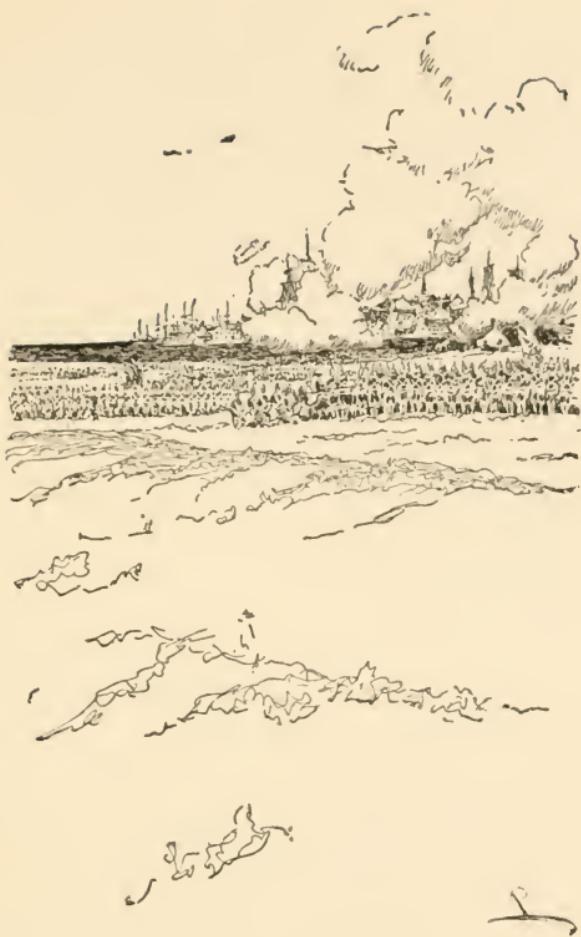
At length the men have started, with  
a cheer (it seemed faint-hearted),  
In their scarlet regimentals, with  
their knapsacks on their backs,  
And the reddening, rippling water, as  
after a sea-fight's slaughter,  
Round the barges gliding onward  
blushed like blood along their  
tracks.

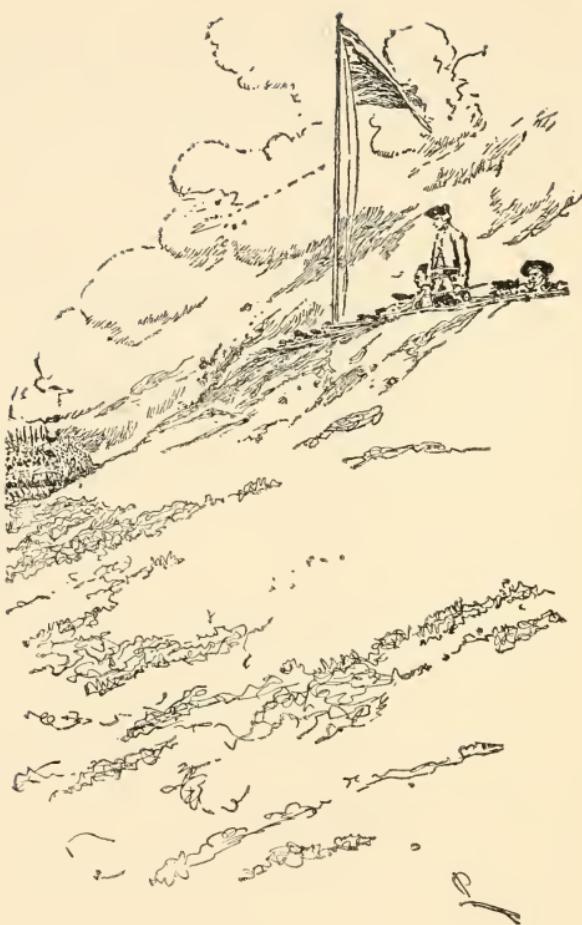


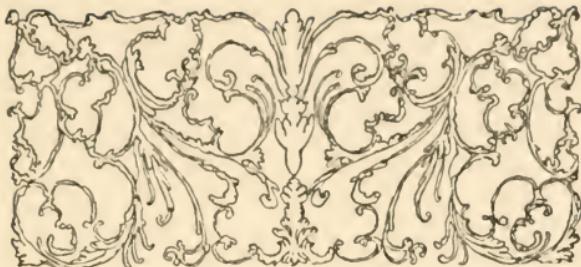


So they crossed to the other border,  
and again they formed in order ;  
And the boats came back for soldiers,  
came for soldiers, soldiers still :  
The time seemed everlasting to us  
women faint and fasting, —  
At last they 're moving, marching,  
marching proudly up the hill.



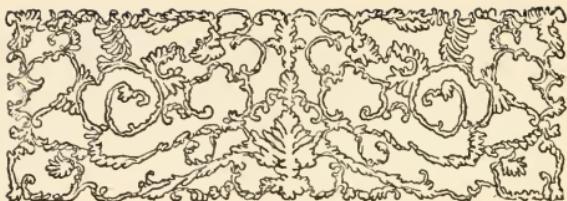






We can see the bright steel glancing  
    all along the lines advancing —  
Now the front rank fires a volley —  
    they have thrown away their shot;  
For behind their earthwork lying, all  
    the balls above them flying,  
Our people need not hurry; so they  
    wait and answer not.





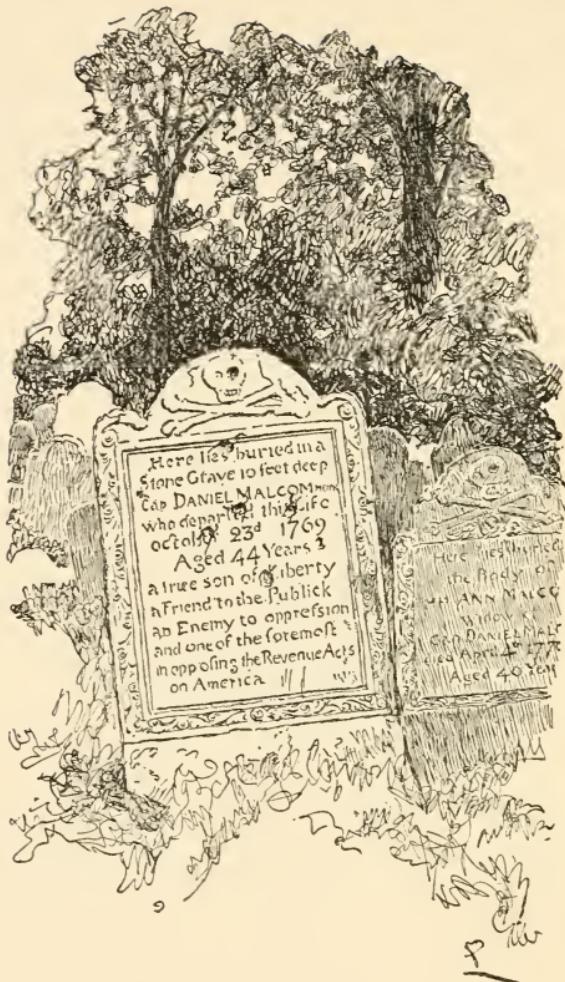
Then the Corporal, our old cripple  
(he would swear sometimes and  
tipple), —

He had heard the bullets whistle (in  
the old French war) before, —  
Calls out in words of jeering, just as  
if they all were hearing, —  
And his wooden leg thumps fiercely  
on the dusty belfry floor : —





P.





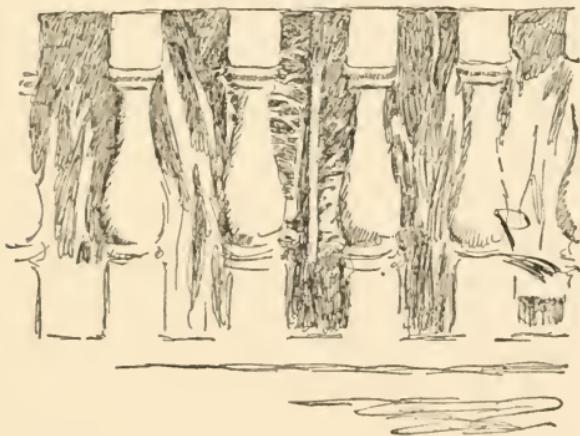
“Oh! fire away, ye villains, and earn  
King George’s shillin’s,  
But ye ’ll waste a ton of powder afore  
a ‘rebel’ falls;  
You may bang the dirt and welcome,  
they’re as safe as Dan'l Mal-  
colm  
Ten foot beneath the gravestone that  
you ’ve splintered with your  
balls ! ”

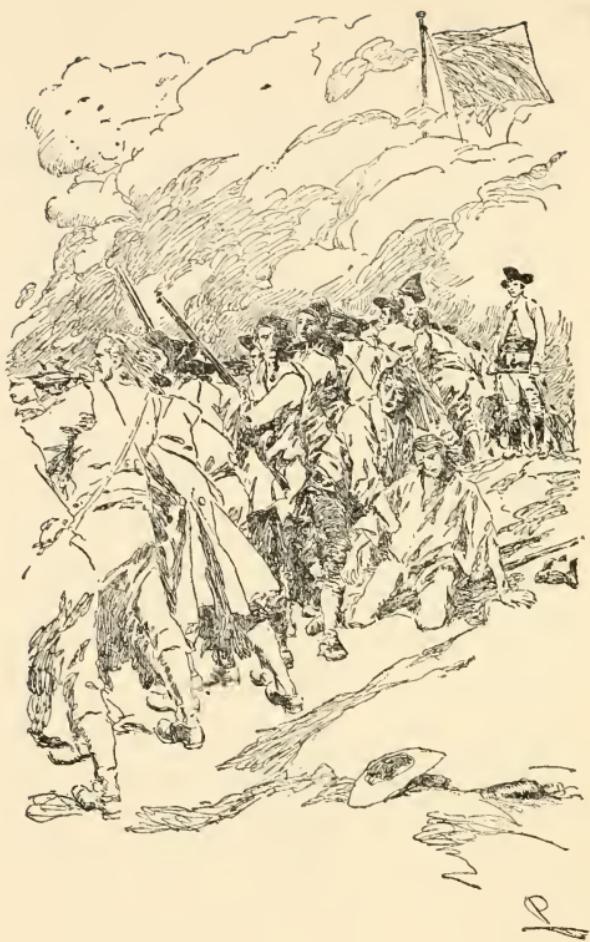




In the hush of expectation, in the  
    awe and trepidation  
Of the dread approaching moment,  
    we are well-nigh breathless all;  
Though the rotten bars are failing on  
    the rickety belfry railing,  
We are crowding up against them  
    like the waves against a wall.



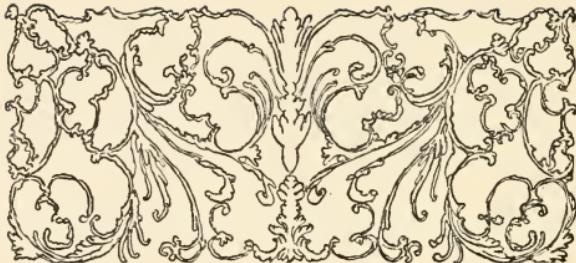






Just a glimpse (the air is clearer),  
they are nearer, — nearer, —  
nearer,  
When a flash — a curling smoke-  
wreath — then a crash — the  
steeple shakes —  
The deadly truce is ended ; the tem-  
pest's shroud is rended ;  
Like a morning mist it gathered,  
like a thunder-cloud it breaks !





Oh the sight our eyes discover as the  
blue-black smoke blows over !  
The red-coats stretched in windrows  
as a mower rakes his hay ;  
Here a scarlet heap is lying, there a  
headlong crowd is flying  
Like a billow that has broken and is  
shivered into spray.









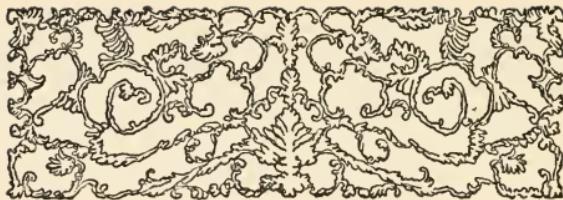
Then we cried, "The troops are  
routed! they are beat — it can't  
be doubted!"

God be thanked, the fight is over!"  
— Ah! the grim old soldier's  
smile!

"Tell us, tell us why you look so?"  
(we could hardly speak, we shook  
so), —

"Are they beaten? *Are* they beaten?  
ARE they beaten?" — "Wait a  
while."





Oh the trembling and the terror! for  
    too soon we saw our error:  
They are baffled, not defeated; we  
    have driven them back in vain;  
And the columns that were scattered,  
    round the colors that were tattered,  
Toward the sullen, silent fortress turn  
    their belted breasts again.









All at once, as we are gazing, lo the  
roofs of Charlestown blazing !  
They have fired the harmless village ;  
in an hour it will be down !  
The Lord in heaven confound them,  
rain his fire and brimstone round  
them, —  
The robbing, murdering red-coats,  
that would burn a peaceful town !



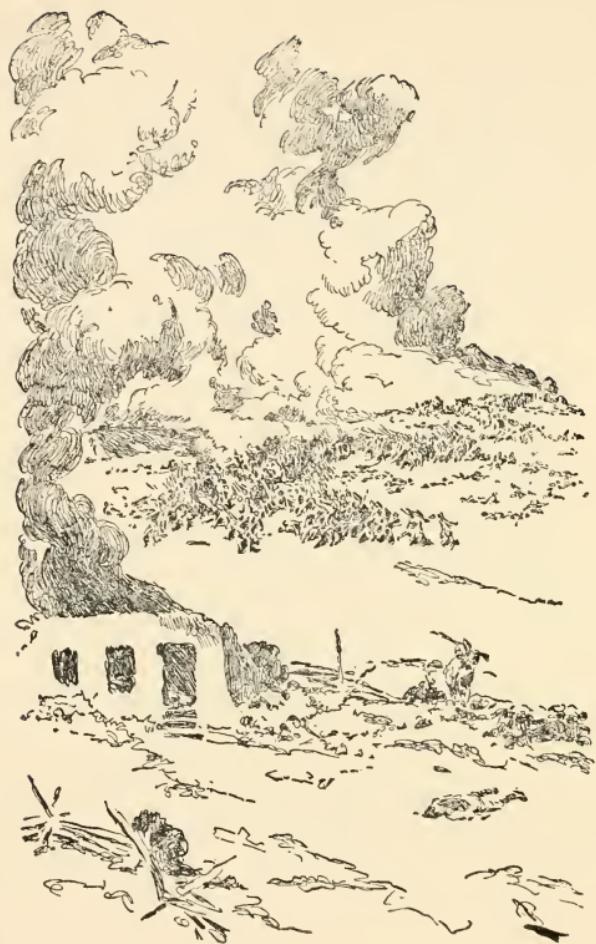


They are marching, stern and solemn ;  
we can see each massive column  
As they near the naked earth-mound  
with the slanting walls so steep.  
Have our soldiers got faint-hearted,  
and in noiseless haste departed ?  
Are they panic-struck and helpless ?  
Are they palsied or asleep ?

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Now! the walls they 're almost under!  
scarce a rod the foes asunder!  
Not a firelock flashed against them!  
up the earthwork they will swarm!  
But the words have scarce been spo-  
ken, when the ominous calm is  
broken,  
And a bellowing crash has emptied  
all the vengeance of the storm!





So again, with murderous slaughter,  
pelted backwards to the water,  
Fly Pigot's running heroes and the  
frightened braves of Howe;  
And we shout, "At last they 're done  
for, it 's their barges they have  
run for :  
They are beaten, beaten, beaten ; and  
the battle 's over now ! "









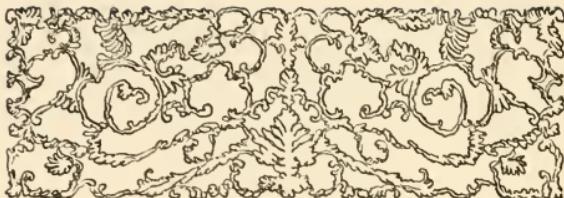
And we looked, poor timid creatures,  
on the rough old soldier's fea-  
tures,

Our lips afraid to question, but he  
knew what we would ask:

“Not sure,” he said; “keep quiet,—  
once more, I guess, they'll try  
it—

Here's damnation to the cut-throats!”  
— then he handed me his flask,

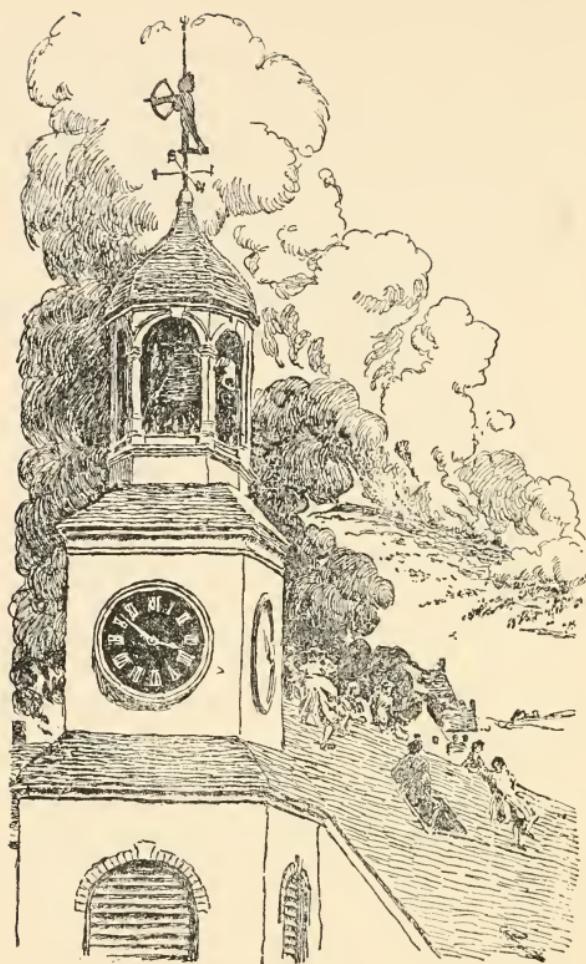




Saying, “Gal, you’re looking shaky;  
have a drop of old Jamaiky;  
I’m afeard there’ll be more trouble  
afore the job is done;”  
So I took one scorching swallow;  
dreadful faint I felt and hollow,  
Standing there from early morning  
when the firing was begun.



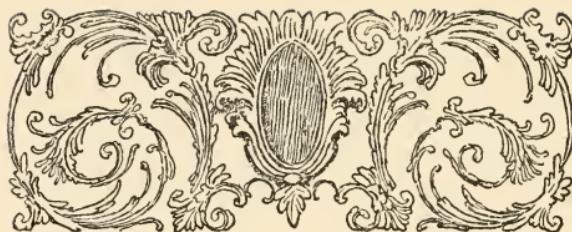






All through those hours of trial I  
had watched a calm clock dial,  
As the hands kept creeping, creeping,  
— they were creeping round to  
four,  
When the old man said, “They’re  
forming with their bayonets fixed  
for storming :  
it’s the death-grip that’s a-coming,  
— they will try the works once  
more.”





With brazen trumpets blaring, the  
flames behind them glaring,  
The deadly wall before them, in close  
array they come ;  
Still onward, upward toiling, like a  
dragon's fold uncoiling,—  
Like the rattlesnake's shrill warning  
the reverberating drum !



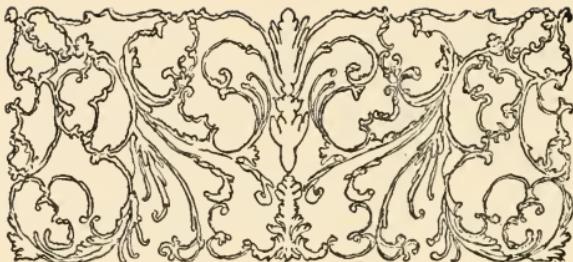






Over heaps all torn and gory — shall  
I tell the fearful story,  
How they surged above the breast-  
work, as a sea breaks over a  
deck ;  
How, driven, yet scarce defeated, our  
worn-out men retreated,  
With their powder-horns all emptied,  
like the swimmers from a wreck ?

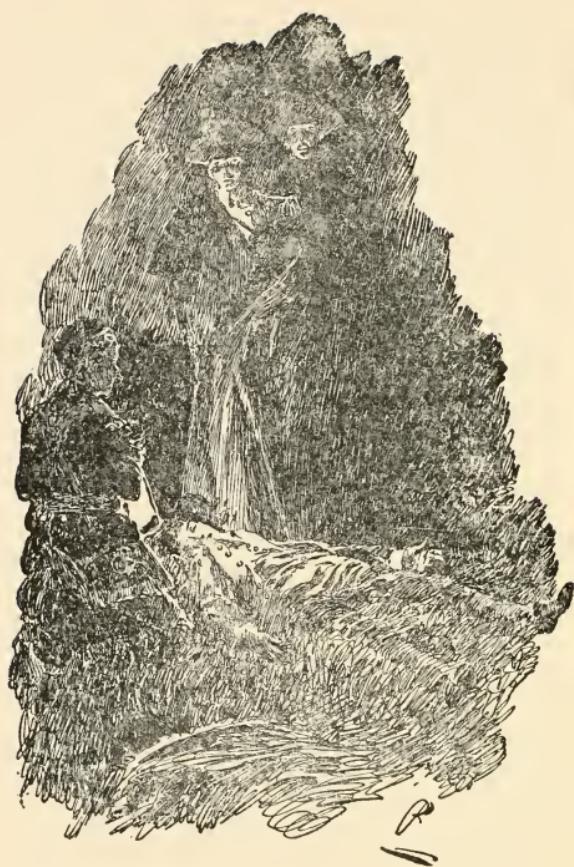




It has all been told and painted; as  
for me, they say I fainted,  
And the wooden-legged old Corporal  
stumped with me down the stair:  
When I woke from dreams affrighted  
the evening lamps were lighted,—  
On the floor a youth was lying; his  
bleeding breast was bare.







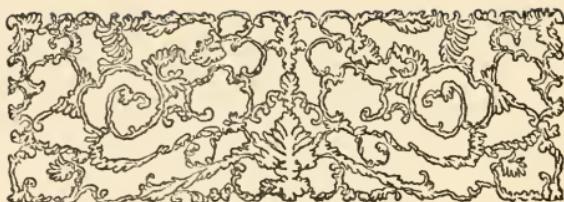


And I heard through all the flurry,  
"Send for WARREN! hurry!  
hurry!"

Tell him here's a soldier bleeding,  
and he'll come and dress his  
wound!"

Ah, we knew not till the morrow told  
its tale of death and sorrow,  
How the starlight found him stiffened  
on the dark and bloody ground.

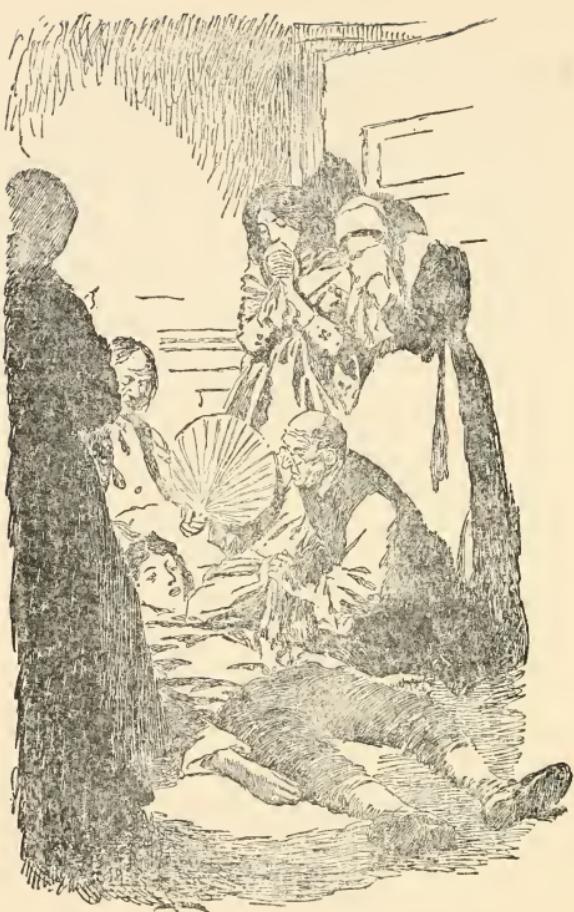




Who the youth was, what his name  
was, where the place from which  
he came was,  
Who had brought him from the bat-  
tle, and had left him at our door,  
He could not speak to tell us; but  
't was one of our brave fellows,  
As the homespun plainly showed us  
which the dying soldier wore.









For they all thought he was dying,  
as they gathered round him crying,—

And they said, “ Oh, how they 'll miss  
him ! ” and “ What *will* his  
mother do ? ”

Then, his eyelids just unclosing like  
a child's that has been dozing,  
He faintly murmured, “ Mother ! ”  
— and — I saw his eyes were  
blue.

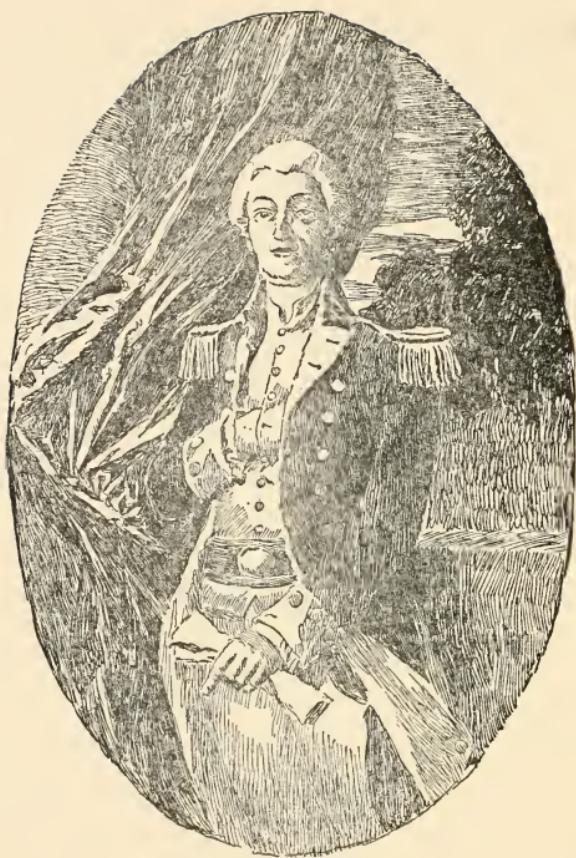




“Why, grandma, how you’re winking!” Ah, my child, it sets me thinking  
Of a story not like this one. Well,  
he somehow lived along;  
So we came to know each other, and  
I nursed him like a — mother,  
Till at last he stood before me, tall,  
and rosy-cheeked, and strong.









And we sometimes walked together  
in the pleasant summer weather,  
— “Please to tell us what his name  
was?” Just your own, my little  
dear, —

There’s his picture Copley painted:  
we became so well acquainted,  
That — in short, that’s why I’m  
grandma, and you children all  
are here!”











